



Podcast 38: The plan was to ignore, so why are we learning to connect?

Episode notes: prekteachandplay.com/podcast38

Hi everyone. I'm Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak, and this is [episode 38](#) of the Pre-K Teach and Play podcast. This one is all about this little word called ignoring. I'm going to give you the context for why during this podcast episode, a little disclosure, and then we'll get straight to the solutions.

There's a couple of scenarios that happen all the time, and all over my travels around this world. One, we have the situation where there is a young child who is demonstrating behaviors that are challenging to the adults who support that child. And so an expert consultant or a behavior team is brought in and asked for advice. How do we help this child? How do we deal with these "challenging behaviors?" So a behavior plan might be generated, a list of expert advice might be shared, and oftentimes in that report or in that plan, you're going to hear and read about words like ignoring, planned ignoring, extinction, or even the phrase, "don't reinforce bad behavior."

So that's one context that I have experienced all the time. And you may have had that experience as well, where you've heard from a behavior team, or an expert consultant, that your job in the instance when there's a child that has behaviors that are challenging, is to ignore, to extinguish, or to "don't reinforce".

Another context is that oftentimes providers, teachers, parents, or childcare professionals...they're worried that their actions are reinforcing the bad behavior. They're afraid that the child's manipulating them and that if they attend to the child, attend to the behavior, that'll actually get worse. So that might sound familiar as well. You might have kind of a heavy heart and not be sure what to do when you see a child demonstrating behaviors that are challenging, and you're really worried that you are "reinforcing the bad behavior." So that's the context.



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In this episode, it's not my intention to fully unpack these terms like ignoring, extinction, or reinforcement. It's not even my goal to say whether they are good or bad. *It depends on the context.* It depends on how these words then get played out in our practices with young children. So my intention is to raise or highlight or illuminate some of the downsides of our use of these words like ignoring, extinction, and reinforcement and then talk about what we might do to move in a direction that's maybe less confusing or less problematic as we're building children's brains.

So, there's at least **five problems** that I see when we use this phrase "ignoring." I'm going to specifically dive into *ignoring* versus the kind of variations that we have in terms of *planned ignoring* or *extinction* or the phrase "don't reinforce." The reason I'm going to pick on ignoring is that's the one I hear the most often. Whether it's as a result of a behavior team's recommendation or a teacher's worry, I hear people say, "Aren't you supposed to ignore that?", or "I have to ignore that, Kristie. I'm not supposed to give my attention there." So that's why I'm going to pick on or unpack or kind of highlight some of the problems that can stem from using this phrase "ignoring."

If you're not confused by this term and it's really clear to you, maybe you are a board-certified behavior analyst or you have a lot of training in applied behavior analysis or you just get this word. Then, your job is to help others understand the nuances of that phrase and how that really looks in practice. Because otherwise, that advice, that suggestion, can get confusing to many of us.

So, there's the **first** problem. This term ignoring causes us to ignore the child. It becomes a slippery slope and it might sound like semantics, but it's a really big difference when we want to ignore a behavior and not, let's say, fuel the fire. So whether the child is running or screaming or tugging on our shirt, any of these things that might be challenging to us, what we *really* want to do is not fuel the fire of that behavior, but we don't want to ignore the child. As my colleague [Laura Fish](#) would say, "[You want to see the child behind the behavior.](#)" But all too often when we say ignore, people think, "I have to ignore the kid."

Second problem when we talk about ignoring, is it can often give the message that the emotion that the child is experiencing is somehow "bad", that we've even used this word "ignore" about "bad" behaviors. But what we see out in the real world is really just this [expression of a big emotion](#). As Alyssa from [Seed & Sew](#) would say, "We've got to dig in there. We got to get into the messy emotions." We want children to know that all emotions are important and that we're here to help them process it. If we go to ignoring, we're not sending a message that this emotion is okay. It gets kind of interconnected with the behavior that's challenging us.



The **third** problem I see with this phrase of planned ignoring (or more specifically ignoring), is that the focus turns into an expectation that the child can control themselves. We usually say “exhibit self-control”, or worse yet, we sort of develop this preoccupation with ourselves and we are worried that we're being manipulated. We're worried that we are doing something that will reinforce the wrong thing. We're losing sight of the fact our attention needs to be focused squarely on the child and we need to really be thinking about how can we [minimize the stressors](#) that are causing the child to respond in this way. So we get sort of preoccupied with ourselves and we might not be attending closely enough or focusing enough on how to minimize [stressors](#).

The **fourth** problem I see with ignoring is that it misses a child's efforts to communicate. You've probably heard it so many times but it's really important and worth repeating and that is all behavior. All things that we see outside of the child are ways of them communicating with us. So when we ignore the behavior, we are sending a message to the child that we're not there to communicate, we're not going to read their cues, we're not going to do things that may help them. And this idea of [all behavior is communication](#), just a quick side note- let's not narrow it down to “all behavior is either to [escape or to get attention](#)”. It's too narrow of an expression of this complexity of what humans experience by way of emotions and what those emotions are communicating to us.

The **fifth** problem is that when we use ignoring, it becomes a strategy that we even teach children to use with each other. Recently as I was preparing for another podcast that I'll be doing with [Shauna Tominey](#) on bullying, I saw time and time again that one of the strategies that was overtly being taught to young children who were being bullied was how to ignore the other child.

Now, we'll dive deep into bullying in another Pre-K Teach and Play podcast episode. However, if we're teaching children to ignore other children, the four previous problems come back into play. If I teach a young child to ignore another child, I am causing confusion about...are you ignoring the behavior and not fueling it? Or are you ignoring this child that you are trying to form relationships with, friendships, and have social engagement? It can cause the problem again of sending a message that that child's emotions aren't important and that they're in some way a bad emotion. It can also focus on these children who are really young and don't have fully integrated, fully mapped, fully developed brains that they have to exhibit self-control. It also misunderstands their efforts to communicate.



So those five problems come up over and over again, when expert consultants, behavior teams, or just even our own worry is on this idea that the solution is in ignoring. Now again, if you understand what real planned ignoring is trying to do, if you can tease apart and really help others or help yourself know how to see the child behind the behavior, go for it. But for the large majority of us, we get a little bit confused when we think about ignoring. And I'll just say the first problem comes up time and time again. We ignore the child in our effort to ignore the behavior.

Let's move on to solutions.

What can we do instead of ignoring? So let's first talk about shifts in our mindset. You know me, it's always [mindset before method](#). You're like, "Okay, I've waited this long to get to the methods and the solution. Why are we now talking about my mindset?" Because we know that what we believe, what we think, how we perceive the world- that *that* is going to drive our decisions and our actions with a move towards a mindset and a vocabulary that really **promotes connection and attunement**.

I have a couple of ideas of things you can say in your reports or as you're talking to one another. But it doesn't have to be these. It's just saying, what are some things that you could do that will really change your mindset away from "ignoring bad behaviors" to things that are promoting "connection and attunement"?

In fact, the other day on a behavioral website, I saw the phrase "approach silently." I thought that was a great middle ground phrase because approach would mean I'm going to interact with the child. Silently, just as I'm not going to give energy, I'm not going to fuel whatever it was that I saw outside of the child that I want to decrease or again, not fueled. So "approach silently" is a good phrase that suggests connection and attunement. Sometimes you'll hear about "create space and connect". Sometimes people will even say, "Take a breath." That might seem a little bit "soft" but it's really saying when you can create a little bit of pause between a child's action and your response, you can create different neural connections for the child between the things you want to connect and the things you don't want to connect.

We often say in our "[teach before the peak](#)" work that we want you to "go silent". You might even use the phrase "go calm." Either of those is suggesting that you have to sort of put your own mask on before helping the child, but that you're still going to help the child. Whereas ignoring, especially ignoring bad behavior, might suggest I have no interaction with you. In fact, you can almost see someone turning their back to a child or moving away from the child. We're trying to create phrases that shift the mindset towards **connection and attunement**.



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Even if you think about Tina Payne Bryson and Dan Siegel's book on showing up ([The Power of Showing Up: How Parental Presence Shapes Who Our Kids Become and How Their Brains Get Wired](#)), everything in their work is talking about things that you're going to do to ensure that the child ends up with a secure attachment. And none of those actions would be to turn your back or walk away from the child when all too often when we tell people to ignore, they think they have to ignore the child, which again is the opposite of connecting and being in attuned communication and interaction.

So that's our **first solution** is to shift our mindset by moving our language away from words that suggest that I'm going to be disconnected and move towards words that promote connection.

The **second** thing that we want to do is very much related to language, but also to perception. So we want to remove the word *want* from our vocabulary and shift it to *need*. If I say the child wants my attention, the child wants another turn, the child wants to be first in line, there's already this sort of privilege, sort of you get two scoops of ice cream, you get whatever you want mentality. But if I say the child needs my attention, the child needs to be first in line, the child needs me to fill in the blank, sort of starts to shape your mind to say, or it starts to shift your mindset to say, "Huh, there's something going on here that I need to address." Oftentimes that's taking the spotlight off of that behavior, that thing that kind of bugged us in the first place, that challenging things and it's going to shine a light on the child's [need](#) for safety, both physical and emotional satisfaction, and connection. So we start to see our job slightly different and we start to go, "Hmm. How can I address this child's need?"

The **third solution** is again, moving our mindset, but we do that by having different goals for the interaction. When we look at the behavior plan, when we look at the advice from an expert, maybe even we are trusting our own intuition, we want to think about what is my goal in this situation. So whether a child is dropped to the floor, the child is whining, the child is rushing to be the first one out the door, the child is having troubles transitioning from outdoor play to indoor play, or from block play to snack time, whatever the situation is, take a look at what is your goal in this moment.

You want to move from a goal of having the child demonstrate self-control to a child [learning how to self-regulate](#), which we all know is through [co-regulation](#). You want to shift away from trying to manage children's behaviors to managing their arousal states until they can do so on their own. You want to shift the goal that we are trying to stop misbehavior...to the goal or the mindset that we're trying to reduce stress behavior. We also want to avoid a goal around compliance and really say, "My goal here is to help this child process a big emotion."



And then the last one here in this shift of our goals is that we want to shift away from the goal of teaching a replacement behavior or teaching the appropriate behavior. Instead, recognize that maybe in this instance what the [child needs most is the lifeline](#), is help using coping strategies, is to re-engage into social engagement.

So those are our three solutions. All of them are shifting our mindset. Starting off with our language so that we're going to use anything that promotes connection and attunement. We're going to replace the word *want* with the word *need* so that our vocabulary and our perception begins to shift. And then we're going to think about having different goals at that moment, in that weathering of the storm. In the middle of that meltdown, we need to be really clear on what our goal is so that we can achieve the outcome that helps the child thrive the most.

We've talked about a lot of things in this episode from the five problems of ignoring to three big shifts in our mindset. So you'll want to make sure that you check out the [show notes](#) for this episode because I give you lots of links to other resources that break each of these ideas down into smaller and more actionable steps. In particular, there are links to our work on [teach before the peak of the storm](#) where we'll talk about what you do when you're weathering the storm. How do you in that moment, approach a child in a way that isn't ignoring, that is about connecting, and that is promoting [self-regulation](#).

As I wrap up this episode, I want to acknowledge that despite the challenges, especially in this little tiny word called ignoring, we do live in a time of remarkable change. A time for rethinking how we go about ensuring that all children thrive not only in school but in life. Daily, we are seeing a greater focus on children's wholeness, the power of play, and the importance of building inclusive classrooms and communities. These changes are really signaling an open opportunity in our work. Really a time for hope and foreseeing a real change in early care and education.

So, I have three reminders for you to take with you in this time of hope and of possibility.



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Your **first takeaway** is that really you are the expert. Whether you're a parent, a childcare provider, teacher, a therapist, or administrator, it doesn't mean that we can't get outside opinions or outside expertise. But when it comes down to it, we don't want to outsource the hard work of helping children learn self-regulation skills. We want to be able to [leverage our own superpowers](#) and trust that we know how to interact with young children and how to best support them.

The **second takeaway** is that I want you to remember that relationships are the active ingredient, sort of right on the back of why you are the expert, why you don't want to outsource this type of challenge. It's because your relationship with the child is all that matters in helping this child learn how to self-regulate, how to be socially engaged, how to get attention or to approach something in ways that are more socially appropriate. So our job in that relationship with a child is really to recognize stressors, reduce stressors, and then to restore a child's energy.

The **third takeaway** is that you've got this. I know it's hard to believe. I know that you've spent many nights not sleeping and many days crying thinking about the challenges that many children bring into a group setting or into the classroom or into your home. So I want you to know that the reason that you've got this is because you've got two big jobs and that you're learning how to do those two big jobs.

The first job is how to be a teacher, how to help children widen the window of tolerance, how to regulate all of those stressors so they [stay in the green zone](#), and how to interact with other humans in ways that are productive. You also understand that your second job is that of the boat captain, and that's when your job is to offer lifelines. Not to teach, but to help a child get back into the green zone.

Again, I'll put links in the [show notes](#) to all of these words and phrases if they're new to you. But just remember, [you're the expert](#). You're the one with the strong relationship, *and you've got this*.

